



RIDING TATES GAP

by Sandra Thames

There I was at my paternal grandparents on top Straight Mountain. I had ridden the bus from Andalusia with my older brother, Jimmy (who threw up in the bus after the Sylacauga snack of doughnuts —don'tcha just know he was mortified!!)

That first night we just visited, catching up on the latest family news as we feasted on fried chicken, corn, peas, potatoes, and cornbread.

After the dishes were washed we sat around trying to watch the George Gobel Show on the old black and white Admiral television. Gosh, it seemed to me that reception should be good way up on top the mountain. I mean what was there to block the airwaves? After a while of watching the "snow" I excused myself to the adjoining front bedroom always called Aunt Jewels room. Seems to me I was barely asleep when Grandpa said "Rise and shine little lady." How can a body shine at 5 am? I wondered just how early Grandma must have "shined" because she always had more fried chicken, white milk gravy, homemade cathead biscuits, sliced tomatoes and a huge bowl of scrambled eggs on the table. I didn't want them to know their puny little city grandchild wasn't much of a breakfast eater —at least not just the time my feet hit the floor! I mostly stirred my food around while Grandpa told me how skinny I was and how I needed to eat more.

Scraps went into the slop tub on the back screen porch. Thank goodness I was spared the hog feeding job. Unfortunately my lot was to be egg gathering. Grandpa raised chickens as did many other folks in the 40s, 50s, and 60s in that area. Those chickens scared me to pieces. Honestly, they had the meanest little eyes. Still gives me chills to remember my several attempts to stare them down and reach "under" for that fragile treasure. After several clumsy attempts there were less than a dozen eggs in my basket. "Grandpa, this is it". He looked in the basket and said "Go back and finish the job". At that particular time my thoughts of John Alexander were not too charitable. Surely he could show a little mercy! Years later I realized that it was his way of making me face my fears.

After egg gathering comes egg cleaning. YUCK!!!! Now that is one disgusting job. But, I wiped and stacked eggs into those cardboard dividers that went into the large crates Grandpa used to carry his eggs to market in Birmingham. Don't think one was ever broken by me (not an easy feat with my tendency to spill, drop and bump).

Later that week I would boil dirty clothes in a huge black pot over a fire, pick crab apples from trees near the fields visit the Phillips with my Grandparents (Grandpa and Uncle Jim were cards and always kept us entertained) and learn a few domestic tidbits from Grandma. Saturday finally came. Grandma got her purse, Grandpa put a roll of bills taken from the Clabber Girl can into his pocket (no wallet) and into the little red and black Dodge pickup we crammed —skinny*Grandpa, skinny me and not at all skinny Grandma. Down the road and down the mountain, around and around the scary, narrow road. Rocks skittered off the side of the mountain all the way to Davis Coal at the bottom in Bates Gap. When we crossed the railroad and waved at whoever was out front of Mrs. Battles store I would exhale

In town we bought all needed staple items, got back in the pickup and drove to the next block to Elmores. Grandma wasn't into walking. This was the highlight of the week. Grandma always made the same purchase from the candy counter—a large bag of peach colored circus peanuts and a large bag of orange slices. YUM! All the way back to Tates Gap we laughed, joked and chomped on that candy. Sometimes we had to dig that candy off our teeth.

As we neared Mrs. Battles my heart began to thump a little harder. Don't get me wrong, I loved my Grandma but going back home up that mountain was always the worst time because on the return trip Grandma would be on the OUTSIDE (dropping off the mountain side) and it terrified me that her weight might cause us to shift to the right a bit and there we would be at the bottom of the mountain, bruised, cut or maybe dead, grinning from ear to ear with all that glistening orange slide candy in our teeth!! So, on the return trip I always scooted just as close to Grandpa as I could so as to equalize the weight in the truck. In all those years we never slipped at all. Probably Grandpa could have driven that route with his eyes closed. Yes sir, being an Alexander (even a city slicker) had its merits. STILL DOES.....



THE ENCOUNTER

by Sandra Thames

My Granny wasn't afraid of anything –well if she was, I never knew about it. If something was bad, animal or human, she simply called it a varmit and got rid of it or took herself away from it.

Widowed in 1937 before all of her eight children were grown, she has survived with the help of the older ones who worked 45 miles away at a shirt factory. She prayed two of her sons through WWII and in the 1950s lived alone in her very small uninsulated, unpainted house which had been built at the beginning of the century and hastily added onto as the children had been born.

The house was weather gray, had no electricity, no running water or modern conveniences. Our light was kerosene lamps (I was always terrified of dropping one and setting us on fire), our refrigeration was a 50 lb. block of ice which we purchased from the Rolling Store or my Uncle Phillip would bring to us from the icehouse in town.

Granny cooked all meals on a wood stove, swept her dirt yard clean with brush brooms, heated the front room (living room and bedroom) with a small fireplace. To me, it was perfect. No screen doors either, the house just "stood open" in the summer with all six doors thrown wide to catch the occasional breeze from the giant oak and bay trees.

One of my favorite chores was to go down the sandy lane (about 100 yards) to the hard road and get the mail. (hard meaning clay, not asphalt) On this particular day I was not watching my step but instead was listening to a bobwhite calling from a near-by tree.

Suddenly I realized something dark was on the white sand in front of my half the lane. I abruptly stopped and moved not a muscle. Granny, who always watched me from her spot in the swing called out "Snake?"

I slowly nodded my head and she told me to look him straight in the eyes and not move. After what seemed an eternity she was by my side and said "Yep, that one is a varmit." With a sharp, quick whack of the garden hose he was history.

We walked back up the lane where Mr. Snake got hung on the fence so we could watch him jerk and wiggle till dark. My knees were kinda wobbly but after a while I went back to retrieve the mail.

You can bet my eyes were scanning the edges of the lane looking for a possible Mrs. Snake. Thankfully she was a no-show.

MRVF-90

FA-SO-LA **ECCO**

by Sandra Thames

School was out for the summer and for me that meant a trip to Oneonta to stay with my Dad's parents.

This particular summer (I think 1955) Daddy wanted me to visit in the month of June so I could attend the Homecoming at Hopewell Church near Altoona.

I had always enjoyed listening to the Sacred Harp music sung by the Alexander clan. Many times I had watched my Daddy as he played tapes of their singing. The music always touched him so deeply that he seemed to be transported to another time and place where we, the non-singers, could not go.

He would exclaim "Hear Jewel on that part?" or "That's Mama" or "Doesn't Papa sound great?"

I arrived in Oneonta on a Thursday afternoon. On Saturday I spent the entire day with my Aunt Vera and Uncle Oscar. Boy did I have fun with them, as both had the knack for making everything a real adventure. Whether we were picking apples, feeding hogs, making chocolate cakes, drinking nearly frozen Cokes (small, real bottles please) or sitting on the porch watching the dust settle, I always loved being there.

Grandma and Grandpa came to get me about dark. I had taken my bath in a large washtub on Aunt Vera's side screened porch so as to avoid a pan "birdie bath" at my grandparents.

Seemed I had hardly closed my eyes before Grandpa was calling me to breakfast. I nibbled my biscuit which had a few smushed frozen strawberries pushed inside and drank my big glass of milk. Grandma was dashing about the kitchen, stirring pots on every burner of the stove and periodically checking the oven.

Flour was strewn about the floor between the green Hoosier style cabinet and the stove, and dozens of bowls sat on or near the sink. Grandpa was in and out the doors, loading the truck with anything he had thought anyone might need for the day.

Being the co-chairman of the homecoming meant that my Grandpa felt personally responsible for the enjoyment and hospitality that each individual was due. If it was cold weather, the coffee pot was always going with lots of cream and sugar available. If it was a scorcher, the tea and lemonade never ran out.

The cemetery had been cleaned earlier in the week and the familiar plastic arrangements stood proudly on the headstones of those who had gone before us.

Grandma had labored for hours on Saturday afternoon with her cooking and now on early Sunday morning she was making all the final touches. Tablecloths made from chicken feed sacks were laid in baskets or boxes along with dozens of serving spoons, forks, and knives.

Finally, countdown for getting dressed began. Grandma walked from the back bedroom to the kitchen several times in her sparkling white cotton slip. She powdered and perfumed, sweated, plaited her hair, checked on me, checked the food again, hollered directions or questions to Grandpa and finally got to the hats.

She pulled the hats out one by one. Some had gotten mashed since the last singing, others perhaps had lost their flower and still others just didn't suit her fancy or match her outfit. After several attempts the choice was made and the long lethal looking hat pin jabbed in just so.

By this time Grandpa had loaded the little Dodge pick-up, double-checked the house and walked around the yard doing "busy stuff" several times. Finally we squeezed into that little cab and down the road we went to Hopewell.

The air was filled with excitement. I had cousins, aunt, uncles and lots of folks who knew my Daddy. Of course I had to endure the endless hugs and "Oh my, you must be Alvin's girl. You look just like him!" (Those bucky Alexander teeth were always a dead giveaway).

I sat for 3 hours listening to relatives and other Sacred Harp lovers as they called out the number of the song they had chosen to "lead."

To this day, I love Sacred Harp although those two summers of lessons never "took." Outdoor toilets, dinner on the ground, hugs and kisses, new babies, and a few faces missing as the years progressed...but underneath it all, the continued tradition of FA-SO-LA.



MRVF-90

UNDERTOW

ECCO

by Sandra Thames

We had spent four wonderful days at the little pink stucco motel located in the heart of Destin's fishing village.

We had eaten at Staff's restaurant two times—what a treat for our family. Daddy could put away 8 to 10 dozen raw oysters, Mother about 4 dozen and I usually managed at least two dozen.

The fried "everything" platter always followed. We had spent days walking the beaches, watching the fishing vessels go out, proud, clean and eager each morning and return to home port each afternoon loaded with sunburned and weary fisherman. It was such a thrill to watch each boat return to dock with the days catch hung all around the boat. We would anticipate each of the Marler-owned boats and try to guess which would have the trophy fish of the day.

Although I was not a swimmer, my love for the beach was very real. The splash of each wave, the feel of the sand rushing under my feet, the invigorating, salty smell of the air, the occasional squawk of a gull, and the

majesty of the sea at night with reflections of nearby homes and businesses dressing the dark sea with jewels—all this was magic to me.

The motel was located on the "fishing side/bay so occasionally in the late afternoon Mother, Daddy and I would grab our red-striped beach towels, a couple of innertubes, plaid cotton sheet blankets, our trusty weathered Coleman gallon water jug (with the neatest spigot), a couple of potted meat sandwiches, fruit, lotion and our zories (flip-flops).

Daddy quickly arranged everything in the trunk and off we went to the public beach. The car was parked up on the main highway and the trek across the shifting sand began. We could not even see the water from where we parked so it was always a special joy to top the last set of dunes and view the breathtaking Gulf of Mexico.

We were extremely careful to avoid the grassy spots which held sand spurs and beggar lice. This particular summer Daddy sported a new swim outfit called a cabana set. Tan muted plaid with white terry trim looked great on my handsome black-haired daddy.

In about 10 minutes a shelter had been made with poles and cotton sheet blankets. Under this shelter my very fair-skinned Mother would sit and read while Daddy tried time and time again to entice me to the deeper water to "practice swimming" or floating.

After a long stroll down the beach looking for sand dollars (in the 50's they were all over the place), checking out other folks' shelters and sand castles, we would go back so Daddy and Mother could have their final swim beyond the breakers.

Me, good kid that I was, (a big wimp) played around in the shallow area. There was a large family to our right and squeals were plentiful.

Suddenly I heard my Daddy shout "RUTH!! RUTH!!" My Dad never called Mother by her given name. It was always sweetheart, honey, Mother, darling but not RUTH!! The urgency in his voice grabbed my very being as I started toward him and Mother. "NO" he shouted and began frantically to push Mother away from him. I was thinking what most 10 year olds would think — SHARK!!

Daddy's head began to disappear then reappear further away. Even from the distance I could sense his terror. Mother turned to go back to him but he screamed "NO! SAVE SANDRA!!!" Mother hesitated then turned and fought her way back toward me. Of course my screams were now being heard all down the beach so a small crowd had gathered.

As I looked toward the spot Daddy's head had last gone under, my mind would not, could not accept that anything could take my Daddy away. Another man had eased out into the breakers and was shouting instructions and demands seemingly to the wind.

Suddenly Daddy appeared in the tumble and onslaught of the waves. The stranger continued to give Daddy verbal commands and slowly, slowly my wonderful Daddy began to make his way parallel to the shore and then a step forward.

We were in a slow motion time warp for endless minutes and then Mother started lunging through the shallow waves to a wild-eyed, grey-faced man who could hardly put one foot in front of the other. The three of us fell together, embracing and sobbing.

Once back to shore we lay together on the hard wet sand and talked about the terror we had survived. We were a solemn threesome late that night as we sat outside the Flamingo, just drinking in the beauty of a full, silver moon.

SAVE SANDRA!!! Yes indeed, a father's love.....

ROSEMOND S BILL OF RIGHTS FOR CHILDREN

MRVF-90

EC09



Because it is the most character-building, two-letter word in the English language, children have the right to hear their parents say "No" at least three times a day.

.....

Children have the right to find out early in their lives that their parents don't exist to make them happy, but to offer them the opportunity to learn the skills they-children-will need to eventually make themselves happy.

.....

Children have a right to scream all they want over the decisions their parents make, albeit their parents have the right to confine said screaming to certain areas of their homes.

.....

Children have the right to find out early that their parents care deeply for them but don't give a hoot what their children think about them at any given moment in time.

.....

Because it is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, children have the right to hear their parents say "Because I said so" on a regular and frequent basis.

.....

Because it is the most character-building activity a child can engage in, children have the right to share significantly in the doing of household chores.

.....

Every child has the right to discover early in life that he isn't the center of the universe (or his family or his parents' lives) that he isn't a big fish in a small pond, that he isn't the Second Coming, and that he's not even-in the total scheme of things-very important at all, no one is, so as to prevent him from becoming an insufferable brat.

.....

Children have the right to learn to be grateful for what they receive, therefore, they have the right to receive all of what they truly need and very little of what they simply want.

.....

Children have the right to learn early in their lives that obedience to legitimate authority is not optional, that there are consequences for disobedience, and that said consequences are memorable and, therefore, persuasive.

.....

*Every child has the right to parents who love him/her enough to make sure he/she enjoys all of the above rights. **

.....



ROLLING STORE

by Sandra Thames

Granny had me get the foot tub and set it on the front porch before dark.

"That's to be our reminder to get the ice for the ice box tomorrow". (As if I needed a reminder of my favorite Thursday activity)

Rolling store day was good news for a little girl because Granny always gave me a dime all my own to spend. You see, the ice came down the rural roads of south Alabama packed in layers of croaker sacks inside the magical rolling store.

Oh, the wonders inside the back of that truck. Eggs, bread, sugar, syrup, cloth material, sewing notions, small tools, books and magazines, cigarettes, dipping snuff and chewing tobacco — the list was endless.

Granny knew the distinctive sound of the rolling store almost as well as she could tell the sound of who was coming down the hill on the "hard road."

Thursday morning I grabbed the foot tub and waited impatiently on the steps for the tell-tale sound of the store.

When the store arrived, 50 pounds of ice was lifted out the back with the largest tongs I have ever seen. I climbed the drop-down steps and began to draw in the quietest and deepest breaths (the smells were wonderful).

Decisions, decisions, the world was mine for a few minutes. Finally I decided on a Big Ike and Mike Plank and a Coke (my Granny said co-coler). We'd share.

The nice old man even gave me a couple of Tootsie Rolls. I waved goodbye and began my labor of love — dragging the fifty pounds of ice two feet at a time across the sandy soil and the lane.

Drag, pause, drag, pause, for more than two hundred feet to the porch where Granny waited. It was important that I do my part in "taking care of Granny."

As I neared the steps she came down and helped me lift our precious ice and head down the hallway to the back side of the house. With clean towels we manhandled the hunk into the small left cubicle of the little icebox.

A small space near the front of the ice would allow room for a quart jar of milk. But first we had to go get it.

We slipped on old shoes and headed a few hundred yards up the hard road to my Aunt Leona's house. Granny didn't keep cows anymore, so our milk (both sweet and clabbered) we got from Granny's oldest daughter.

After a fresh pumped dipper of water we went inside to get the milk. On the small kitchen table, right in the middle of green and white oilcloth, was a dish with butter "setting up," a pint of buttermilk and a quart of sweet milk.

The smell of just baked cornbread had my stomach about to growl. Guess my skinniness made me look pretty pitiful because the next thing I knew, half a pone of cornbread was wrapped in a well-worn brown paper bag and handed to me.

We got all our goodies and headed home. On the return it was decided that we would have the hot cornbread and cold water. (Granny called water Adam's Ale because she said it was all Adam had.)

The Big Ike and Mike Plank would be our before-bed treat along with a glass of milk.

What a day it had been — the rolling store and special treats.

Within 20 minutes a little granny and a 10-year-old were feasting on lunch in lower Alabama. No major complications for me in 1953.